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ABSTRACT

Although college teachers of English face a very real economic crisis, the current intellectual crisis is even more significant. The first failure of this intellectual crisis involves what we have done: we have replaced true scholarship with the new interpretation of texts, mistakenly believing that we need not know any outside knowledge of a literary text in order to interpret and understand it. The second failure of this intellectual crisis involves what we have left undone: we have neglected the teaching of reading and writing and have done virtually no research on the writing and the reading of ordinary texts. Until we return to scholarship and stop neglecting the students of reading and writing, the crisis in the college teaching of English is not likely to subside. (CC)

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DEFINING THE CRISIS AND OFFERING SOLUTIONS

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One crisis in the college teaching of English is, of course, economic. For the services that we perform--as both scholars and teachers--there is a steadily decreasing demand, a shrinking clientele, and with it decreasing opportunities for our employment. To some extent this crisis is, outside agriculture, medicine, and some other technologies, every department's crisis--the result of such things as declining college enrollments and declining state and federal support of higher education. But English and the other humanities seem expecially bad off.

Why should this be? A tempting explanation is rampant philistinism. The wealthiest nation in the history of the world prefers to spend its money, not on "the best that has been known and said in the world," but on television, motor cars, cosmetics, alcohol, head-shop merchandise, plastic trolls, and the paintings of Walter Keane. This explanation is tempting because it relieves us of any responsibility for our plight, placing it all on society and making us look like spiritual and intellectual jewels in a moral dung heap. And there may be something to it but not, I'm afraid, much.

I'm inclined to look elsewhere for an explanation. In addition to the economic crisis, there is, I believe, a less obvious, little recognized crisis. It's an intellectual crisis. Some

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of what we have to offer as scholars and teachers is rather less than "the best that has been known and said in the world." Some things we do, have little or no intellectual interest, and some things that have great intellectual interest we don't do. Indeed, we sometimes pride ourselves upon not doing them. I suspect, moreover, that the relationship between the intellectual crisis and the economic crisis is, to a significant extent, the relationship between cause and effect. The economic crisis may well be an epiphenomenon--the rash that symptomizes the intellectual disorder. Finally, I suspect that treatment of the intellectual disorder will go far toward clearing up the rash.

Before I explore this intellectual crisis, let me recite what (perhaps mistakenly) I take to be axioms. ¶ First, five axioms about all scholarship or teaching:

(1) There are two possible kinds of knowledge: knowing-_how_ (to do something) and knowing-_that_ (something is the case).

Knowing-_how_ is unconscious, implicit, intuitive, unformulated knowledge of rules or laws guiding some human action. It is knowing how to do something; it is having an ability, competence, or skill. All speakers of English, for example, have knowing-_how_ knowledge of the grammatical rules of English guiding their speaking and listening and their writing and reading.

Knowing-_that_, on the other hand, is conscious, explicit, formulated knowledge--either general (of the grammatical rules of English, for instance, or of the laws of thermodynamics) or particular (of the date of composition of _Robinson Crusoe_, say, or of the distance of the moon to the earth). It is having a justified true belief about something. Linguists, for example,

have knowing - that knowledge of some grammatical rules of English; literary theorists, of some conventions of Elizabethan drama; literary historians, of some dates of composition, first performance, and publication of Elizabethan plays.

(2) Where there can be both kinds of knowledge of one thing, knowing-how knowledge is convertible into knowing-that. The task of linguists, for instance, is to convert--to formulate--speakers' unformulated knowledge of grammatical rules; and one task of literary theorists is to formulate Elizabethan playwrights' and audiences' unformulated knowledge of the conventions of Elizabethan drama.

(3) A corollary of (2) is that knowing-how knowledge is always logically and temporally prior to knowing-that. If no one had knowing-how knowledge of the grammatical rules of languages and of the conventions of drama and literature, linguistics and literary theory would be out of business.

(4) The business of scholars qua scholars is to acquire knowing-that knowledge.

(5) The business of teachers qua teachers is to help students acquire knowing-how knowledge, knowing-that knowledge, or both.

Now, two axioms about English scholarship and teaching:

(6) The business of English scholars is to acquire knowing-that knowledge of language, especially of the English language. Knowledge of particular texts, of course: the order of The Canterbury Tales, the authorship of the letters of Junius, the date of publication of the Lyrical Ballads, the correct interpretation of Comus, Maxwell Perkins' contribution to Thomas Wolfe's novels, and so on. But also, and perhaps more important, knowledge of rules or laws guiding the creation and the inter-

pretation of texts: the grammatical rules of English, the conventions of Elizabethan drama or of reliable-narrator novels, the laws of rhetoric (what makes some essays rhetorically better than others--easier to understand and more persuasive?), the laws of language acquisition (how do people learn how to speak English? to write it?), and so on.

(7) The business of English teachers is, first, to make some students into English scholars (that is, to help them acquire knowing-that knowledge of language and also acquire knowing-how knowledge of how to acquire that knowledge, of how to do English scholarship) and, second, to improve the linguistic skill of all students (that is, to help them acquire knowing-how knowledge of writing and reading).

With these axioms (if they are axioms) in mind, let's look at what I take to be the intellectual crisis of English scholarship. How have we--many of us, at least--failed intellectually? In two ways, I think.

First, many of us have replaced scholarship with games. We have replaced the search for knowing-that knowledge of particular texts and of rules or laws guiding their creation and interpretation with various manipulations of texts. The chief game is the new reading or new interpretation.

Perhaps this abandonment of scholarship began--innocently enough--with I.A. Richards' Practical Criticism, in 1929. His main purpose in having students read a poem sub specie aeternitatis--out of context and with no knowledge of its authorship, period, or genre--was, as he put it, "to introduce a new kind of documentation to those who are interested in the contemporary state of culture."[1] He wanted to show that, unless the context tells students how to respond to a poem, some of them cannot discriminate the genuine

article from complete balderdash. And he wanted to help them acquire knowing-how knowledge of how to discriminate. Like an apostle of consumerism trying to help people learn how to keep from being flimflammed by TV commercials, he wanted his students to learn how to resist kitsch.[2]

But perhaps Practical Criticism was also the germ of the New Critical doctrine of the autonomy of the literary text: Readers of a literary text, unlike readers of ordinary texts, need not know--indeed, it is wicked of them to know--anything at all about anything except, perhaps, the language of the text (often at a stage three- to six hundred years removed from the stage of the author's language). In particular, they ought not know what meaning the author intended the text to have; nor ought they know the rules or conventions that the author used in creating, and intended readers to use in interpreting, the text. For readers to have and use knowledge of these things is, according to the New Criticism, a fallacy--the Intentional Fallacy. Thus, either the text speaks for itself, without the mediation of rules or conventions, or readers are free to use any ones they please in interpreting it.

Without the advantage of hindsight, we might well imagine that the doctrine of the automony of the text would have put an end to the study (as opposed to the mere reading) of literary texts. If the text speaks for itself, there is nothing to study. Nor is there if readers are free to assign any meaning to it they please. But, far from coming to an end, the study of literary texts flourished. Perhaps for reasons that might interest Professor Parkinson, two large generations of Ph.D's in English and other literatures--mysteriously if not altogether arbitrarily, like

witch doctors--became experts in interpreting these texts. They developed methodologies or strategies for devising new readings or interpretations, or rather a vast smörgåsbord of such methodologies. And these they taught their students.

Teaching students how to interpret literary texts is not in itself, of course, anything new, nor is it objectionable. It is an ancient, honorable, and useful activity. It is--if (7) is indeed an axiom -- one of the two duties of English teachers. People learn how to do many things without being taught but simply by being human, alive, and members of a certain culture with certain institutions. This is the way Elizabethans learned how to interpret Shakespeare's plays; Augustans, Swift's satires; Victorians, Dickens' novels; our students, soap operas and The Godfather. This is the way all people learn how to speak their native language. There are other things, however, that people can learn only by being taught. Our students, for example, must be taught how to interpret Shakespeare, Swift, and Dickens, because, though human and alive, they are not members of the culture for which these authors wrote. We need to help them acquire knowing-how knowledge of the conventions that these authors used in creating, and intended readers to use in interpreting, their texts.

We can give our students this help only because we have, by our scholarship, converted--formulated--Elizabethans', Augustans', and Victorians' unformulated, knowing-how knowledge of the relevant conventions. But, if we are New Critics and therefore have accepted the doctrine of the automonous text, we cannot, ex hypothesi, help them to learn how to interpret texts according to these conventions. All we can do is to help them to learn how to

interpret texts in some other way--a way not grounded in scholarship at all.

The history of the abandonment of scholarship is very largely the history of the rise of the New Criticism, and we can trace much of it in the pages of PMLA. The abandonment has, of course, been gradual, but the Second World War is a watershed.

Prewar articles in PMLA are such things as bibliographies; rime indexes; studies of particular linguistic forms (philology), of genres, of parallels and sources, of the date of composition of a text, of the sequence of stories in a text, of the stage history of a play, of the history of the critical reception of a novel, of principles of scansion, of the relationship of a text to society, of the history of criticism, and of the history of a taste--along with an occasional reading or interpretation.

In postwar PMLAs, on the other hand, articles like these become increasingly rare, and articles with titles like "The Meaning of X," "A New Reading of X," and "The True Theme of X" become more and more numerous.

Two questions are, of course, in order at this juncture. First, are the good old prewar days all that good? Surely this prewar scholarship is dull, boring, tedious, tiresome, pedantic, and--the most damning of all adjectives--extrinsic. It may well be all these disagreeable things. But it is scholarship. Its goal--not always achieved, of course--is knowing-that knowledge of particular texts or, occasionally, of rules or laws. The writers of these prewar articles have something to say, whether true of false, about texts. And, when what they have to say is true, they contribute

to the sum of knowing-that knowledge. When they interpret a text, for example, their aim is to discover what the author intended and the original audience took it to mean. As one scholar in 1915 puts it,"...medieval literature must be interpreted in the light of !the conventions, the preconceptions, the literary milieu' of the medieval author's times."[3] Another, writing on Prometheus Unbound in 1925, argues that, if a poet intends no allegory, there is none: "An accidental allegory is no allegory at all; there cannot possibly be any purpose in its figurative meaning." [4]

The other question that demands to be answered at this juncture is this: What's the matter with new readings or new interpretations of old texts? The answer, briefly, is that they cannot in principle contribute to the sum of knowing-that knowledge. They may be fun or interesting or chic or charismatic or exciting, but they cannot in principle be either true or false. And the chief reason is that they are based upon the doctrine of the autonomous text and upon the false premise that knowing-that knowledge is possible without knowing-how knowledge; and therefore they are not grounded in scholarship. This premise is false because it contradicts Axiom (3): that knowing-how knowledge (of how to interpret a poem of a certain kind, for instance) is always logically and temporally prior to knowing-that.

Another way of putting the assumption implicit in virtually all New Critical interpretation is this:

Interpreting a literary text is radically different from interpreting ordinary texts. For a literary text, there is no audience competent to interpret it in the way that a native speaker of English who was born and brought up in America and reads the

New York Times every day is competent to interpret a news story in it. Interpreting a literary text is, like the practice of surgery or dentistry, a skill requiring professional expertise. Just as it takes a surgeon to excise a tumor, or a dentist to extract a tooth, it takes a literary scholar--a Ph.D. in English, say--or at least someone who has sat long at the feet of a master to extract the meaning of a literary text.

The correct assumption is (I believe) quite different:

For any literary text, as for any ordinary text, there is (or was) an audience--frequenters of James Burbadge's Theatre, for instance, subscribers to Mudie's circulating library, readers of Scribner's Magazine or Esquire, or regular viewers of Rhoda--competent to interpret it. And all that a literary scholar need do is to formulate, or make explicit, the rules or conventions that this audience knows--that is, to convert the audience's knowing-how knowledge into knowing-that knowledge.

This is what prewar scholars interested in interpretation did and what few postwar scholars do. Not an issue of PMLA goes by without at least one or two articles announcing the real meaning or the true theme of a literary text written hundreds of years ago. Neither the audience for which the author wrote nor any subsequent audience knew how to interpret the text correctly, but the author of the article does.

The inevitable culmination of New Critical interpretation is the outright, frank rejection of the view that an interpretation can be either true or false, correct or incorrect, or even more or less an approximation of the true one. In interpretation, there is simply nothing to be right or wrong about, for there is no objective reality (for example: what the author intended and the original

audience took the text to mean) with which the interpretation may be compared and to which it ought to correspond. An interpretation of a literary text is like a decision to spend Saturday evening at a discotheque rather than at the movies, not like the belief that there is a stone having the power to transmute base metals into gold. It is neither true nor false.

This view of interpretation is manifested in some reader-response criticism and in the work of what E.D. Hirsch,Jr., in The Aims of Interpretation, calls Perspectivists;[5] the belief that knowledge of what an earlier author intended a literary text to mean, and what the original audience took it to mean, we cannot acquire, because our perspective is necessarily different from that of the author and that audience.

Those of use who follow Stanley Fish or Roland Barthes and Jacques Derrida may, of course, be right. But, if we are, then by being right we have renounced literary scholarship--the search for knowing-that knowledge of literary texts. For scholarship is, by definition, the search for knowing-that knowledge; and knowledge of that kind is, by definition, justified true belief.

There are, I have said, two ways in which I believe we have failed intellectually. One of them I've just described. Let me briefly glance at the other.[6] Like the first, it is our failure as both scholars and teachers. Unlike the first, however, the failure lies, not in what we've done, but in what we've left undone.

I'm thinking of our neglect, as both scholars and teachers, of reading and writing. English scholars have done virtually no research in the reading of ordinary texts and virtually none in writing. Similarly, we've very largely ignored the teaching of

reading and writing.

Let's look just at writing for a moment. First, basic research in writing. What little research there is has been done by our colleagues in education and in psychology. We know virtually nothing about either the process of writing or the product. How do we learn to write in the first place? As speakers of English, of course, we have knowing-how knowledge of better and worse writing. But our knowing-that knowledge is virtually nil.

How does learning to write differ from learning to speak? What makes some pieces of writing rhetorically better than others—easier to read and more persuasive?

Yet departments of English have been teaching composition for almost a century. Tens of millions of teacher contact hours, tens of millions of student hours, and tens of millions of dollars have been invested in this enterprise. But all, or mostly, for nothing, it is generally agreed. The teaching of freshman composition has been, on the whole, a conspicuous failure.

One reason is that we have despised it. Who teaches composition? Only those who must. Graduate students who need the money to get the Ph.D.'s that will enable them to do something else. And those of us who, failing to get Ph.D.'s, can do nothing else. There is no prestige, security, or money in teaching composition. The rewards for teaching it well are identical with the rewards for teaching it ill: our colleagues' contempt, no tenure, high teaching loads, and low pay.

The other reason I've already discussed: the intellectual reason. We simply don't know what we're doing. The teaching of composition is a technology without any corresponding science. It's like horticulture without botany, animal husbandry without zoology, mechanical engineering without physics.

The crisis in the college teaching of English is not likely, I believe, to get better until we return to scholarship, not necessarily scholarship of the prewar varieties, and base our teaching upon it. As teachers, we have as our largest clientele, both actual and potential, students of reading and writing; and our most urgent priority is to stop neglecting them.

NOTES

[1] (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1929), p. 3.

[2] Richards' discrimination therapy was widely practiced in England in the thirties. See, e.g., Denys Thompson, Reading and Discrimination (London: Chatto & Windus, 1934) and its acknowledgement of Richards' influence (p. vii).

[3] John Livingston Lowes, "Chaucer and the Seven Deadly Sins," 30 (1915) 239.

[4] Newman I. White, "Shelley's Prometheus Unbound, or Every Man His Own Allegorist," 40 (1925), 173.

[5] (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p. 147 et passim.

[6] I have discussed the first way at greater length in "Cumulation, Revolution, and Progress," New Literary History, 5 (1974), 477-90; "Linguistics and Literary Criticism," in From Meaning to Sound, ed. Hassan Sharifi (Lincoln, Neb.: University of Nebraska, 1975), pp. 205-9; and rev. of The Aims of Interpretation, by E.D. Hirsch, Jr., Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism, 35 (1977), 370-3. I have discussed the second way in "Freshman English in America," Universities Quarterly, 19 (1965), 391-5; and in "Freshman English: A Hypothesis and a Proposal," Journal of Higher Education, 37 (1966), 24-32.